

17 NOVEMBER 1975

The Countdown

It was the most momentous shake-up in the short history of the Ford Administration. And the process that led up to it—a complex patchwork of private meetings, sudden phone calls and cover-ups—was probably as revealing of Gerald Ford's government as the President's final announcement last week of who was in and who was out. From a variety of major and minor characters, NEWSWEEK's Washington bureau pieced together the story behind the story:

TUESDAY, OCT. 14

The possible need for changes at the top of the Ford Administration had long been discussed in the corridors of the White House. But the first clear steps toward last week's shifts came when Commerce Secretary Rogers C.B. Morton met with the President to say he wanted out. The reasons were largely personal—Morton, 61, who has been treated for prostate cancer since 1973; wanted to reduce his heavy workload and serve instead as a political adviser in the White House; he suggested January as the time for his exit.

The decision was left dangling, however, since Morton found the President preoccupied with his own political prospects against Ronald Reagan in next year's New Hampshire primary. Morton suggested that a Boston Brahmin like Elliot Richardson, sometime Cabinet member and currently U.S. ambassador to Great Britain, might be useful in the New England campaign. Ford noted that Richardson himself was getting restless overseas and had sent a letter offering his services stateside after Christmas.

THURSDAY, OCT. 16

Ford met with five members* of his "kitchen Cabinet"—old friends and advisers who have helped him shape policy since the earliest days of his surprise Presidency. Back then the consensus was for Ford to stick with the foreign-policy team he had inherited from Richard Nixon, putting his own brand only on the Administration's domestic flank. Now, however, talk turned to the increasing in-house discord over national-security policy and how it reflected on Ford's shaky Presidential campaign and on Ford himself.

Nobody specifically proposed sacking Defense Secretary James Schlesinger or downgrading Schlesinger's rival, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. But the outlines of the problem were clear, and Ford apparently came away from the session with a growing feeling that he had to do something. Said one source later: "Somebody said something that touched off his thoughts about the quality of his leadership."

MONDAY, OCT. 20

Schlesinger held a press conference at which he launched an impassioned attack on "deep, savage and arbitrary cuts" in defense spending by the House Appropriations Committee, whose chairman—Texas Democrat George Mahon—is an old pal and sometime golfing buddy of the President. As it happened, Ford agreed that the cuts (\$7.6 billion) were too sweeping, and he said as much to Mahon. The President did not mention Schlesinger's rebuke, but it was a striking example of the Defense Secretary's blunt personal style and impatience with political finesse, both of which Ford found increasingly uncongenial.

Even before Richard Nixon's resignation, Vice President Ford had speculated to *The New Republic* that as President he would probably look for a Pentagon boss who could handle relations with Congress more deftly. Once installed in the Oval Office, Ford developed a greater appreciation of Schlesinger's management and grasp of complex defense issues, but he never felt comfortable with the cerebral, often disdainful, Harvard Ph.D. By mid-October, too, Schlesinger had begun dropping hints that he might resign rather than preside over the heavy cuts contemplated in the 1976-77 Pentagon budget.

FRIDAY, OCT. 24

This time it was a speech by Schlesinger—filling in for an ailing Ford in Gainesville, Fla.—that made the President "blow his stack," according to sources close to the Secretary. Schlesinger did nothing to restrain his doubts about reductions in U.S. defense spending, emphasizing that "the Soviet Union will—if these trends continue—become preponderant" in military power. What further irritated Ford, said another source, was that "the audience lapped it up . . . It was the sort of speech Reagan could have given, and the President hated it even more because of that."

The speech also followed Schlesinger's decision to permit Lt. Gen. Daniel Graham, head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, to circulate within the Pentagon a cold-warish study of "Dé-tente in Soviet Strategy." The report listed such Soviet objectives as dominance in Europe and an acceleration in the breakup of the Western alliance. "In Moscow's view," it concluded, "détente is clearly working to its advantage."

SATURDAY, OCT. 25

Kissinger, just back from his distinctly untriumphant mission to China, briefed the President on his trip. At the 90-minute session, Kissinger argued for a diplomatic downgrading of Ford's own

upcoming China visit—for foreign-policy reasons—by the addition of stops in Indonesia and the Philippines. Donald Rumsfeld and other White House aides later contended that the extra stops might be a domestic political liability. Kissinger won out in the end, but some insiders thought that the problems over China had angered Ford and sharply reduced Kissinger's standing.

After the China meeting, Ford tried to watch some football on TV (Southern California vs. Notre Dame), but he evidently decided the time had come for the decisions he had long been pondering. He abruptly called Kissinger and Rumsfeld back to his office. After the obligatory small talk, Ford laid out his plan to assert control over foreign policy: Schlesinger must go, Rumsfeld would replace him, and Kissinger would have to give up his post as head of the National Security Council. Neither Rumsfeld nor Kissinger accepted on the spot, nor had the President decided when he wanted to make the changes. But the die was clearly cast. Afterward, the President went out to play tennis with adviser William Seidman against Rumsfeld and campaign director Howard (Bo) Callaway. The President and Seidman lost both sets.

By some accounts, Rumsfeld was far less surprised by the President's decision than he later suggested. Administration sources said that Rumsfeld had long been the strongest proponent of lifting Kissinger's NSC hat. And as early as last winter, other sources said, Rumsfeld was known to be looking at the position of Secretary of Defense as an advantageous one for himself—"a concept waiting for an opportunity."

TUESDAY, OCT. 28

Now it was Ford's turn to be surprised, pleasantly. Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, in for one of his regular weekly meetings with the President, told Ford that he would not be available as a running mate next year (page 41). Rocky's decision provided the President with a bit of honey to sweeten news of the Schlesinger firing among Republican conservatives. Accordingly, the plan that began to emerge from the Oval Office called for announcement of the Rockefeller move before all others.

With Schlesinger still in the dark and Kissinger aides quietly cleaning out his office in the White House, Ford then began thinking of other changes that might be tacked into the package—

continued

*Former Congressional colleagues
Goffin, Mahon, and others.